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Powers' 'Operation Overflight' Brings U-2 Incident Into Focus

By Maurice Duke
Times-Dispatch Book Editor

Francis Gary Powers, the pilot of the ill-fated U-2 spy plane caught deep inside Soviet territory a decade ago, has finally spoken publicly about his role in the incident, which caused a furor in the CIA, wrecked a summit conference, and forced a United States President to make the unprecedented admission that he had authorized espionage.

Released on May 1, exactly 10 years after the high altitude plane was shot down near the small town of Sverdlovsk, "Operation Overflight," by Francis Gary Powers with Curt Gentry (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 375 pp., \$6.95), is both a factual and a personal narrative which traces the events surrounding the incident. The book begins at the time Powers was recruited into the CIA from the Air Force and ends when he was working in California—just recently—as an engineering test pilot, once again flying the U-2.

Powers, a native of Pound, a community near Big Stone Gap, addresses himself to many long-standing questions in the book, which is based on personal experiences, diaries and courtroom proceedings in Moscow's Hall of Columns, the site of the trial. Among them are: Was Powers guilty—as many American newspapers and some U.S. Senators argued—of collusion with the Soviets, hoping thereby to save his life? Was he under command to commit suicide, but refused to do so after capture became imminent? Were he and his fellow pilots poorly trained as to what to do if captured? And finally, what accounts for the CIA's not knowing the capabilities of Russian surface-to-air missiles, one of which downed the U-2, when planning Powers' flight?



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THE ANSWERS TO THESE QUESTIONS vary. Explaining in detail his seemingly self incriminating statements made during the myriad interrogations and at the trial, two and a half months after the flight, which began in Pakistan destined for Norway, Powers says that he was trying to signal his home agency that although he had been captured, the U-2 program was not entirely compromised. Following his release, after 21 months in prison, he learned from former colleagues that he had been at least partially successful; but by then, he asserts, the damage had been done. He was marked as an espionage agent who had confessed.

Suppressed, according to Powers, for eight years by the CIA, the book makes the point that the U-2 pilots were insufficiently trained for their missions, which had taken them over many nations other than the Soviet Union. "No one from the agency briefed us on what procedure to follow if we were forced to come down in Russia," he writes. We were told only that "You might as well tell them everything, because they're going to get it out of you anyway." By no means did he tell them everything, he says.

ACKNOWLEDGING THAT HE WAS SUPPLIED with a suicide device, the use of which was optional, he points out that the U-2 assigned to him for the 3,800-mile flight was defective, having crashed once before. Finally, although the U-2s had inadequate destruct devices, no attempt was ever made to disguise their identity, each part being marked with unmistakably American names. Other questions, posed a decade ago and still remembered because unanswered, are also considered in the book.

Probable reasons for the failure of the flight, which marked the first U.S. attempt to fly across all of Russia, are given brief consideration toward the end of the book. Among them, Powers speculates, were the defection to the Soviets of two cryptologists employed by the National Security Agency.

"The full extent of this information has never been made public by either side," he writes. "That the two men knew of the U-2 overflights, however, there can be no question." He notes also that Lee Harvey Oswald, convicted assassin of President Kennedy, had been stationed at Atsugi Naval Air Station in Japan, where a number of U-2s were based. When he defected to the Soviet Union in October of 1959 he "offered to tell the Russians everything he knew about the Marine Corps and his specialty, radar operation. He also intimated that he might know something of 'special interest.' Six months later my U-2 was shot down."

BUT "OPERATION OVERFLIGHT" does not consist only of a vindication of Powers' actions. Nor is it merely a report of the abortive flight, the trial, and the months spent in Lub-yanka Prison, in Moscow, or at Vladimir, some 150 miles away.

Powers includes here many personal observations of the downing of the U-2, which occurred when it was flying at an altitude of nearly 70,000 feet, and of his interrogations and treatment, from capture to the time he was released in Berlin. Personally described also are the Soviet guards and prisons, the contents of letters to and from home, his close friendship with his cellmate, a Latvian named Zigurd Kruminish, imprisoned as a British Secret Service agent, and his troubled marriage which ended in divorce.

The book is, of course, an argument in favor of complete exoneration of Powers, and to a large degree it is successful. One could wish for portions of it to be documented, however, especially the highly central question-and-answer section containing the court proceedings. Did Powers remember it verbatim, as the book would suggest?

The conflicting stories about the U-2 incident will probably never reveal the truth of all that happened. But Powers' book, told as it is by the central actor in the drama, gets us much nearer that truth.

★ ★ ★
"SLIMMING WITH YOGA," (Simon and Schuster, 128 pp., \$1), by Richmonder Audrey T. Webb, with photographic illustrations by Carl P. Lynn, has just been published. The book is composed of a set of simple and useful exercises based on Yoga.